

## From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
<b>Name:</b> Amanda Russell	<b>Date:</b> 21.10.2019 <b>Age:</b> 65
<b>Key issues:</b> Working class background, psychiatric treatment, Feminism, 70s, 80s, Reclaim the Night marches, Lesbian Discussion Group at Gay's the Word, 1984 obscene publications raid at Gay's the Word, Lesbian Line, Fighting Fund, Lesbian Strength marches, Locations: London, The Gateways club, Essex Road Women's Centre, Gay's the Word bookshop, Hebden Bridge	
<b>Narrative summary</b> Amanda was born in London but grew up in Essex. She was always attracted to girls, never liked to look feminine. Didn't feel ashamed but knew it might cause problems. Came out to her parents and was taken to the doctor who referred her to a psychiatrist. Amanda regularly visited London's clubs, and moved there after leaving home at 17. She describes the lesbian / woman-centered club and pub scene in London in late 70s and 80s. Worked as a Harrods kennel hand, and for a number of retailers and bookshops. Started working at Gay's the Word in the early 80s. Brought in more women-orientated stock – she describes the difficulty of getting hold of gay or lesbian books. Started the Lesbian Discussion Group at Gay's the Word. Describes the 1984 raid of the shop. As Manager of the shop at the time, she was questioned and her flat was searched. After that, moved out of London to Hebden Bridge in the late 80s. Discussed trying to find her place in the women's movements of the time, felt the movement too middle-class and heterosexual. Describes the Reclaim the Night marches and Lesbian Strength marches powerfully. Discusses the importance of women's spaces and events and the lesbian community. Volunteered with CAB and Victim Support. Now involved with Calderdale Friends of Dorothy which supports older LGBT.	
<b>Length of interview:</b> 58 minutes	



Evelyn: So today we are recording an interview for From A Whisper To A Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London, and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is the 21st of October 2019 and I'm interviewing the indomitable Amanda Russell. So Amanda, could you start by telling me a little bit about your early days and how you came to an understanding of who you really were?

Amanda: Well, I was born in London, but my parents moved out to Essex when I was quite young. So I grew up there. And I was always attracted to girls.

Evelyn: From your earliest memories?

Amanda: Earliest memories. And never wanted to wear a dress or look feminine. I used to get left behind when the family went out because I refused to dress in the conventional way, and it caused a lot of arguments. I started having a relationship with a girl when I was about 12, but it was never a proper sexual relationship. It was a lot of kissing and cuddling and angsting and loving. It was very tender, but obviously, as the years went on, she became involved with boys and things, so obviously I was broken-hearted.

I worked as a kennel maid. I worked in a factory. So I wasn't really expected to look terribly feminine, apart from by my parents. That was the thing, really. And I suppose the thing about those early days was keeping quiet about it. I didn't feel ashamed, but I knew if it came out it would cause a lot of problems, and finally it did come out.

My mother took me, straightaway, to see the doctor, who referred me to a psychiatrist, whom I saw for ages. I can't really remember a lot, but she said, "Don't worry about it," and told my mother it was a phase. And obviously it wasn't. So a few years later, I moved to London, and that's where it all started, really.

Evelyn: So how did you find your folk in London?

Amanda: I rang a number I found in, I think it was New Musical Express, or something, for CHE, which was then the Campaign for Homosexual Equality. I went to a phone box, phoned the number, and got the only woman that was involved in it. So I was just very lucky. And from there she told me about Friend [London Friend], and I went to London on my own.

Evelyn: Did you phone them from here?

Amanda: No, no. This was when I was still in Essex.

Evelyn: Oh, right. Yeah.

Amanda: This was when I was still a teenager, really.

Evelyn: Yeah. So, the New Musical Express was a magazine around-

Amanda: It was a paper. It's not around any more.

Evelyn: Around different musical interests.

Amanda: And I think that advert was only in there once, because I think they took it out after that when they realized what it was.

Evelyn: So you rang up from Essex and headed to London.

Amanda: Yeah, to meet up with a woman called Rose Robertson, who'd started Parents Enquiry. I've missed a bit out, sorry. Parents Enquiry was about helping parents come to terms

with their kids being gay, basically. And this woman, she was an elderly woman, her son had come out and his friends had had problems coming out to their parents.

I spoke to her quite a lot and she was really helpful, and she wrote a letter to my parents saying that she'd come and talk to them with me, and help them to understand everything. And my mother just went up the roof. "I'm not having a woman like that coming here." Even though she was a grandmother, this woman.

Evelyn: A straight woman herself.

Amanda: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So that was all... All really, really disappointing, to be honest. So I'd go back and forth to London. And through all this I'd met various other woman and found clubs.

Evelyn: Because this was the days before the internet, before mobile phones.

Amanda: Absolutely. We don't really think of how hard it was in those days because it's just how it was. So I teamed up with a couple of women my own age, really, to go out with, and finally I left home.

Evelyn: How old were you then?

Amanda: 17. I left home and just rented a room in one of these women's flats and it went from there. It was just fantastic.

Evelyn: What were the best clubs?

Amanda: The Gateways. The Gateways to begin with.

Evelyn: Describe The Gateways to us.

Amanda: The Gateways, you had to be a member. The only way you could be a member was to be introduced by another member, which I got it like that. So, you'd ring on the doorbell, this was in Chelsea, I can't remember the address now-

Evelyn: Down a side street?

Amanda: Yeah, down a side street. Definitely. You'd ring the bell. A grill would open, and she'd say, "Are you a member?" And obviously you'd say, "Yes." And then you'd go in, and you would walk down these wooden stairs into the club. Obviously, every time that bell went, everybody would look up. So as soon as you set foot through the door you were under scrutiny. This, to begin with, absolutely freaked me out. It was like, "Oh, my God."

Evelyn: So down into this deep, dark basement.

Amanda: Down into this fantastic, dingy basement, where it was just all women. A lot of it was butch and feminine. And it was just one big room with a bar. It was always packed out. A really interesting place. But at the time, you're just wide-eyed and innocent.

Evelyn: What was the mix of women like?

Amanda: Mostly... Well, actually, it was quite a mix. It wasn't mostly older women. It was quite a mixture of women. Very much closeted. You could tell they were, speaking to people that weren't out at work, or just looked like really what we'd consider now straight people, and then on the other side of that there were really butch lesbians. I remember one woman who was a gardener and all her clients thought she was a man. So it was a real big mixture. And it was known as a bit of a meat market as well, which was great. It was brilliant.

Evelyn: Was there a mixture across the classes? Which were-

Amanda: No, I'd say it was mostly working class, and completely non-political, because later on things like the Carved Red Lion, the Crown and Woolpack, Hemingford Arms opened, which were more feminist, which I was more drawn to. But I think somebody went to the Gates, and it was when Margaret Thatcher was being elected. That's how long ago it was. And they were all, "Vote for Maggie. She's a woman." And didn't get the bigger picture at all. It was very much a strange place.

Evelyn: And the two women that ran it?

Amanda: Gina and Smithy? Yeah. I didn't know them, but you couldn't miss them because they were a massive presence. I have no problem with any... I had a friend who worked behind the bar. She said they were quite difficult to work for. And you could imagine that. But didn't really think about the setup, then. But it was a bit odd. Yeah. Yeah. Amazing place.

Evelyn: So, there was a whole range of places to go to.

Amanda: I was lucky, I think. I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time. It's when everything was starting. Obviously, The Gateways had been there for years and years, underground, but everything else was starting up. It was exciting.

Evelyn: So, we are very early '80s?

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, late '70s, early '80s.

Evelyn: Where were you working at this stage?

Amanda: At this stage, what would I have been doing? I think I was working... I worked in various places, but mostly, at that time, I think I was working in Harrods pet department as a kennel hand there, and that was fun. That was quite a riot, actually. It was hilarious.

Very badly paid. I always had badly paid jobs. And then a bit later on, I got into working... I think first of all I worked for John Menzies. I started working there, and then got on their management course because I wanted to do something different for various reasons.

That was okay, but you were expected to be quite corporate, and I really wasn't. So I didn't really fit in because I wouldn't toe the line, and I was a bit outspoken. They put you in different shops, and they put me as far out as they possibly could, you know? I went to this one shop, I think it was in Wembley or somewhere, went up to see the manager, and he said, "I want you to wear a dress tomorrow," because I always wore trouser suits. "I like to see my girls' legs." I think that was when I-

Evelyn: That was not quite the place for you.

Amanda: That was it, really. I mean, I didn't wear anything different the next day, and that caused issues. There was nothing I could think of to do about it, you know? I was always out, as well. I was always out, and that was sometimes just ridiculous. Because I did work with mostly women. And they'd be like, "Oh, don't come near me," as if you would, you know? It was all a bit weird.

Then, after that, I went to work for what was then Claude Gill Books. That became very corporate, as well. I think Books Et Cetera or somebody bought them. But that was all right. But same issues, really. Being asked to make the tea at managers' meetings. I mean, give me a break.

Evelyn: But also, you mentioned that you were drawn to feminist pubs. Did you have a political awakening at this time?

Amanda: Oh, by then I was. I was quite... I'd been to Essex Road Women's Centre.

Evelyn: What was that like?

Amanda: Very straight at that time. I went there to meet women, but there was one other lesbian. Women's rights were just... Everything was, and it was all about abortion rights and stuff like that. Which obviously I'm in favour of. But they were very middle class, and at that time I didn't feel like I could offer anything. So it was really, politically... It was hard. The feminist movement was rising, but it was finding your place in it because it was, I found it, quite middle class. And where did a young lesbian fit in there? But anyway, I persevered.

Then, I don't know how all these feminist pubs started. I don't know where that came from, really. I can't remember. There was probably something that galvanized us all together. After Claude Gill, I went to work for a Whole Foods on Baker Street, as the book buyer there, which was boring. It was so boring. And then Gay's the Word. So yeah. It was a bit of roundabout route, but as I say, being in the right place at the right time was just-

Evelyn: How did you find your place within feminism? Did you find it?

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: Because eventually a place was carved out for the lesbians.

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah, I think-

Evelyn: Whereas initially there was tension.

Amanda: ... we just went-

Evelyn: Weren't there?

Amanda: Yes, there were.

Evelyn: Between straight women and lesbians, I think.

Amanda: Yes. Because they didn't want to be thought of as a bunch of radical lesbians. And obviously lesbians were there.

Evelyn: Looking at women's issues.

Amanda: Yeah. Because it affects us all. Equality and all those. It affected us all. But I think we just all... I mean, I just went along with it and just rode with it, and just dealt with things, really.

Evelyn: Did you go to any of the conferences?

Amanda: I think I went to a couple. I can't remember. Sorry. I do remember going somewhere bizarre.

Evelyn: Oh was it strange? Yeah, the conferences, and the meetings, and the raising awareness.

Amanda: Yeah. Not so much that. Not so much that. I was part of it but not right in the middle of it. I was on all the marches. All the Reclaim the Night, all that business. Because everything that was a women's issue was also a lesbian issue.

Evelyn: Give us a sense of some of those early Reclaim the Night marches.

Amanda: Very angry. Very powerful. Because I think that really brought women together in a way that nothing else had up until then because it was about a particular issue, and made women really look at what was happening. How women were being told to stay indoors and not go out. And that they should have the curfew, and that men were out there prowling around. I think that really did bring people together.



Evelyn: That women's safety was their problem and not men's, essentially.

Amanda: Exactly. Exactly. I mean, looking back on it now, it's absolutely stunning that it was what it was. But it was.

Evelyn: So Gay's the Word. When did you start working there?

Amanda: Oh, God. People always ask me this.

Evelyn: We're talking-

Amanda: I can't remember.

Evelyn: Must be early '80s.

Amanda: Yeah. Late '70s, early '80s. Yeah. You've probably heard the term Token Lesbian. That's what I felt like to begin with.

Evelyn: Really?

Amanda: To begin with. It was very male.

Evelyn: What was the organization there when you joined?

Amanda: Probably the same as it is now. It wasn't a collective, I don't think. It was a limited company owned by directors who'd obviously funded it. They were all men. And I worked with a young guy called John Duncan who wasn't... I mean, he was a director, but he hadn't put money into it, he was just an ordinary guy.

To be honest, to begin with, I found it a bit difficult because I'd been in the book trade, by then, for quite a few years, I knew a lot about systems and stuff, and they were a bit like, "Oh, we don't want people to come in and change things." Archaic stock control. "What the flipping heck's happening here?" But I realized that quite quickly, and stepped back. And it wasn't like we were selling a million books a day. It was fairly quiet.

Evelyn: They could manage on an archaic system without-

Amanda: Yes, yeah.

Evelyn: ... falling to pieces.

Amanda: To begin with. And it did take a while to settle in, because I wasn't just going to be a quiet, token lesbian, obviously. And then started to really enjoy it. I mean, I love books, you know? Books are my thing. But a lot of the books there I had to just think... You know, because a lot of the stuff's quite porny. It's just men's sex stuff. So it was about



getting a better selection of women's stuff, and trying to get an understanding. But obviously that's what they wanted. They wanted a woman in there as well to do that.

Evelyn: So the stock was overwhelmingly male-orientated, originally?

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: And they recognized it and wanted to address that bit?

Amanda: But also, it was hard getting books, then. Where could you buy lesbian or gay books then? Because there weren't any. There was the Well of Loneliness.

Evelyn: The most depressing book ever written.

Amanda: Yes. And I remember before I worked at Gay's the Word, getting Ruby Fruit Jungle from Housmans Book Shop. So it was really hard getting the stock. But we dealt with a really good book shop who was also a distributor in America, called Giovanni's Room. But we couldn't really get a grip... You know, we could only know what they told us. So we ended up getting some pretty weird lesbian poetry, as you could imagine. But yeah, I got into a few arguments with the men because they'd annoy me, and I'd annoy them. But overall it was okay.

Evelyn: What were the tensions?

Amanda: Just being around all those gay men and getting irritated, and their language sometimes, and stuff like that. We had a café in the back, as well, then.

Evelyn: Oh, really?

Amanda: And just these blokes hanging around there all the time, all day, and me thinking, "This is dodgy. There's something funny going on here." And also about some of the books. I didn't want a lot of the books. We'd get these books and I'd say, "I don't want to order this again." And because they were a bit... They were about gay men's sex, obviously they sold like hot cakes. And it was our bread and butter. But anyway, we always resolved things in the end.

Evelyn: I didn't realize there'd been a café in it.

Amanda: It was tiny.

Evelyn: Yeah. It'd have to be.

Amanda: It was just where the loo is now. There was a little section there that was just benches and a table, and we had a coffee machine.

Evelyn: And no loo.

Amanda: No, the loo was still there.

Evelyn: It was still there.

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah. The loo was still there. But yeah, yeah, it was.

Evelyn: Yeah. Tiny little space.

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: So you were flying the flag as the one and only lesbian.

Amanda: Yep.

Evelyn: Did you have many women coming into the shop?

Amanda: Not really. Not that I remember.

Evelyn: Because it probably had the feel of being a men's-

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: ... place.

Amanda: I think a few women came in. But I think it was mostly men. You know, then I was thinking, "What can I do?" You know, to get more women in. So I thought, start up a group, because groups are always really popular. So that's when we decided, I decided, I'd do the Lesbian Group. And they were all really for it. Shut me up.

Evelyn: Did lots of different groups run in Gay's the Word?

Amanda: At that time-

Evelyn: As opposed to just being... selling books?

Amanda: At that time, I can only remember the Gay Black Group. There was a Young Lesbian and Gay Group. I know a lot came afterwards, after I'd left. A lot of groups started using it. But that's all I remember at that time.

Evelyn: So, the Lesbian Discussion Group started up, I gather, I believe, something in the order of 38 years ago?

Amanda: Yeah. Flipping heck. Goodness me.

Evelyn: So I'm told.

Amanda: That's unbelievable.

Evelyn: And still running today. I was there last Wednesday.

Amanda: That is so amazing.

Evelyn: Yeah. And it's very vibrant now, as a point in time for the sake of the recording, 2019. October, 2019. There must have been at least 30 women there on Thursday night.

Amanda: That's brilliant.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Amanda: That makes me so happy. I'm really glad about that.

Evelyn: And a real range. Lots of younger women. Lots of younger women come. I'm one of the older ones.

Amanda: That's really good.

Evelyn: It's really lovely.

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: So you started it off.

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: How did you get people to come? How did you advertise it? I look it up on the net.

Amanda: Yeah. I mean, having lived in Essex, and I lower my voice when I say that, I'd felt isolated. So I knew there wasn't anywhere for women to go that wasn't a pub or a club. And why would you go to a place like that on your own unless you were really quite confident? So obviously I had connections at Gay News. But women didn't see a lot of that. It was mostly... I don't know if Capital Gay was around then. I think it was, the free paper, Capital Gay. Put it in there. We might have had flyers.

Evelyn: I suspect so.

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: In those days.

Amanda: Yeah. And word just gradually grew, really. But I think it was mostly Gay News, which by then had one page for lesbians.

Evelyn: What, a whole page?

Amanda: It might have been half a page. I knew the women that worked there, and the guys at Capital Gay were really nice. Yeah, it must have been like that.

Evelyn: What sort of numbers did you have?

Amanda: To begin with, it was quite scant, you know? It grew very gradually over the years. Sometimes there'd be loads of people, and then the next week you'd think... Because obviously people have lives as well. And certainly if they lived out in the suburbs... It was such a mixture of people. Such a mixture of women. Young women from... Not so many young women from London. More from the outskirts coming in. Dipping in and out over the years. Finding partners there and then breaking up with partners there and-

Evelyn: Not coming back again.

Amanda: ... not coming back again. So it just ebbed and flowed, really.

Evelyn: And a range of discussion topics?

Amanda: Probably very similar to what they are now. Certainly coming out, which still is as important now as it was then. It doesn't get easier for a lot of women. Monogamy, non-monogamy. That was my thing, I'm afraid. What else?

Evelyn: They talk about polyamory today.

Amanda: Right. What is...

Evelyn: Non-monogamy, at the end of the day. Having more than one partner.

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah. Coming out. There were loads of things that we'd probably decide on. We wouldn't decide it in advance. It would be what people wanted to talk about, basically. Relationships was a big one. Stuff like that. Never books which is a shame. Should have started something different about books.

Evelyn: Women's book club.

Amanda: Yeah. Didn't think of that. Yeah, it was good. And then it got a bit much for me so Angie took over.

Evelyn: Yeah, Angie Bates.

Amanda: Which was great. We did it parallel for a while. But she's so enthusiastic, because obviously you wane over the years, and your enthusiasm goes. You burn out. I mean, I did burn out, I think. So she took over, and she was just fantastic. She really was. Is.

Evelyn: Still is.

Amanda: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, great. And she's always had that enthusiasm and vigour. Yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: So other big events at Gay's the Word.

Amanda: Oh, yes. The raid. That was pretty awful.

Evelyn: I think we're at 1984.

Amanda: Yeah. 1984.

Evelyn: Talk me through coming into work. What went on?

Amanda: Well, I got a phone call. It was my day off and I got a phone call from the assistant manager, Paud. He was always called the manager, whenever there's anything written about all this, he's always called... Anyway, to say, "The shop's being raided." So, "Flipping heck, what's that about?" I just... I lived in Kilburn, and got to Bloomsbury as quick as I could. And they were taking all our books and everything. I went in and they were saying they had a writ, because we were importing indecent literature and material. I was like, "What?"

They said, "Oh, you're going to have to come with us." And I said, "No, I'm not. I'm not coming with you." This was Customs and Excise, obviously. They said, "If you don't come willingly we'll arrest you." "Flipping heck." So I went with them. I said to Paud, "Ring everyone else and get a solicitor for me." Anyway, they took me to Woburn Place, which is just around the corner, and just started asking me a load of questions. Where the books came from.

I was completely honest, because we hadn't done anything wrong at all. And what they'd been doing... We knew that our books were being confiscated. Oh, God. Yes, there was all that. Before this happened, we knew that our books were being confiscated, because Giovanni's Room was sending us stuff and we weren't receiving it, or we were receiving it all ripped up and everything. All the packaging. It was mostly the gay men's stuff. All the packaging, you could tell it had been gone through and everything. And this was happening a lot. These parcels just weren't coming in. We were losing money because this was our bread and butter, all this stuff, as I said.

Evelyn: You were paying for books and not receiving them.

Amanda: Yeah. And we knew they'd been sent. So John, my colleague, decided to not have them sent to Gay's the Word, but to have them sent to a different address. So he wrote to Giovanni's Room and said, "Can you send it to this safe house?" And it was his house. He said, "Address it to John Runcie," who was the Archbishop of Canterbury, which they did.

Evelyn: So you felt the fact that Gay was in the title of the bookshop was what was-

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: ... attracting them like a magnet.

Amanda: Yeah. So some of them were sent to John and some to another director who lived in South London, Jonathan Copeland. And we just thought, "Great, that's it," really. "Got round that one." And that preceded the raid, you see? That had triggered something off. I think it was the word safe house. Because the letter had been intercepted. So our mail was being intercepted.

Evelyn: Wow.

Amanda: All sorts of things. They'd been watching us and everything.

Evelyn: This is Customs and Excise, not police?

Amanda: Customs and Excise. No. No. They've got more powers than the police, Customs and Excise. All this was coming out and I was just like... I didn't know what to say. No solicitor had turned up. So I just winged it, really. And then they asked me about a book called Show Me. Now this was a book that was supposed to be sex education for children, and to me, it looked like a book for... It looked really... It had pictures of children. And I thought, "This isn't right. We are not having this in the shop." So Sister Write if they'd take it off our hands, and they said, "Oh, we'll think about it." Anyway, I put it on a high shelf, totally forgot about it.

They found it, and it was like, "You ordered this book." I thought, "I might have done, but I didn't know what it was or anything." So that was awful. But I knew exactly what had happened. I knew people who'd back me up to say, "We're not having this in the shop." Actually, it was down on the directors'... It came up in court. I brought it up in a meeting saying, "I don't want this book here." You know?

They kept me for about six hours, and then finally, this blasted useless solicitor turned up. Because nobody had pushed it, really, and he couldn't come earlier because he'd hurt his foot. And he told me to say, "No comment," to everything. By then it was too late.

Evelyn: After six hours. Yeah.

Amanda: Yeah, yeah. No, I was livid. So they said, "All right, we'll take you home now." "That's great. Thanks very much." They said, "Because we need to look in your flat." They had a writ, signed by the Queen-

Evelyn: The actual Queen?

Amanda: The actual Queen. I looked at it.

Evelyn: Queen Elizabeth II?

Amanda: Yes. That gave them access to anywhere. Anywhere. So they could come to Kilburn High Road. And they looked at... What did they take away? I mean, I think this is quite well recorded, but they took away videos of Dallas, Crufts Dog Show, stuff like that.

Evelyn: Videos that you'd recorded? Just stuff like that?

Amanda: Yeah, off the telly. They looked under our beds, because I was sharing other women, and in the cat litter. There were big bags of cat litter, to take down to the bin, and looking through that. And then they went and I was just like this.

Evelyn: Shaking.

Amanda: It all hit me then.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Amanda: So I phoned... We didn't know if our phones were tapped, so I phoned everyone else and we just met up in a pub, and just like... And then it went on from there. It was horrible, actually.

Evelyn: Yeah. It must have felt like Big Brother come to life.

Amanda: It did. It did. We had contacts by then. I think somebody had contact in the Guardian. This guy, I can't remember his name, it was in the Guardian the day later, or the day after that, saying, "Customs and Excise remove Crufts Dog Show videos," you know, really, all that. And yeah, it went on and on. It went to magistrate court. And I just felt really, oh God, under scrutiny. Because it was, oh God, you know? Everywhere I went people talking about it to me.

By then, I'd decided that I wanted to leave London, anyway. I'd got a job with Lesbian Line. I was working there for a while. But then the money ran out. The grant. And I was glad to get away, but I was coming back for meetings all the time. We just moved up here with the woman I was with at the time, Jenny. We moved up here. And I had to keep going back, which was fine. Eventually it got chucked out of court, because they were total and utter idiots. So that was a laugh.

Evelyn: Were you a celebrity? Were the papers looking for interviews?

Amanda: I think it was on the local news, and I think my name was mentioned. On the news in the southeast. Can't say local about London, can you? I think it was, and there was a picture at some point, but we managed to keep a lid on it. You know, we didn't talk to anybody



about it, because it was being perceived as dirty, and these dirty books, and everything. Which as a feminist was horrifying for me. So I kept a very, very low profile.

Evelyn: How did other feminists feel about that?

Amanda: I personally-

Evelyn: Did they understand? Or did you have-

Amanda: I personally got support. And the women at Sister Write bookshop there, they were very supportive. And a lot of people came out in support of us. A lot of celebrities. When the campaign started, you know? A lot of it was men, but it was the men who had all the money. They made huge donations and everything. But by then I was stepping away, really, because I'd had enough.

Evelyn: Unsurprisingly. So, the campaign was-

Amanda: The campaign was the Fighting Fund. It was the Fighting Fund, to raise money for the legal costs, for the trial, which was going to have to be in the Old Bailey. And obviously we had to pay barristers and solicitors. So that was ongoing. But then it got dropped.

Evelyn: So, of course, as the manager, your name was in the frame all the way through.

Amanda: Yeah. And the director. Yeah.

Evelyn: Did it trigger discussions, or action, around censorship?

Amanda: Yes. It did. It did a bit. A lot less than you'd think. But yeah, what is pornography, and what is erotica? There's always that, isn't there? And that's been an ongoing debate for decades and decades, and it will go on to the future. And I don't know. I know that book *Show Me* was pornography, but I wouldn't have it in the shop. So it's all... Yeah.

Evelyn: So you moved up to Hebden Bridge.

Amanda: Yes. I moved up here in one of the coldest years ever and nearly died of cold.

Evelyn: What year did you come up?

Amanda: About '87, end of '87, I think. Complete life change. Change of everything. I eventually got a job in the local bookshop in town, in the Bookcase. I was there for years and years and years. I did a degree while I was there and everything.

Evelyn: Did you love it as much as *Gay's the Word*?

Amanda: No. But I made changes there. I managed to get, at first, a shelf of lesbian books, and a shelf of gay books, and gradually expanded it. I got the *Pink Paper*. *Diva*, when that

started. I got all those in the shop, because obviously there's a lot of lesbians around here. I made a presence there.

Evelyn: I should hope so, too.

Amanda: Yes.

Evelyn: Hebden Bridge, lesbian central.

Amanda: It wasn't so much then, to begin with, but yeah.

Evelyn: But since you've got here-

Amanda: Yes.

Evelyn: ... it's become-

Amanda: I know. But now, eventually, you don't need those sections because everything's integrated, which is interesting. I mean, I find that really interesting, when I go into bookshops and see where things are, and how that's addressed.

Evelyn: What do you feel about the general integration as opposed to having something that's special?

Amanda: In some ways, it's good. I mean, I like that about books. I like it about the music industry. All that sort of stuff. But I still value women-only. We've got a disco in Todmorden that's been going since the early '80s. No, probably about the mid... That's women-only. And that happens every month. I don't go to every single one. Well, I haven't been for a long time. But having it there is just brilliant.

Evelyn: Yeah. A women's space.

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: It's nice to have that.

Amanda: And you know it's always going to be there. You think, "Oh, shall I go to the disco this month? Maybe, maybe not." But you know, that attracts women from all over the region. Liverpool, Manchester. People come from all over to go there. In those early days in London, well, up until we were leaving, there were women-only things. There were women-only things in clubs and pubs and nights. And I took it for granted. And I still think that women's space is important.

Evelyn: If you could sum up, from your time at Gay's the Word, what made it so special?

Amanda: I think it was unique. Totally unique. It was never boring. And as a book seller, it was a challenge, and it was really good. Really exciting times then in the publishing industry and everything. Yeah, that's about it really.

Evelyn: And it was a meeting place, as you say, the groups started-

Amanda: Yes. It was a resource. We started a really good resource where you walk in... It's not like walking into a room, or downstairs into a cellar, like The Gateways. You can walk in and pick up a book and feel comfortable, because who doesn't feel comfortable with books in their hands? But it's about that. It's about having somewhere safe. Yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: It's a lot about safe spaces, isn't it?

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Amanda: I think it's important.

Evelyn: So, here in Hebden Bridge, you carried on carrying the torch.

Amanda: Yes.

Evelyn: And doing your little bit for LGBT activism.

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: And how's it been spending many years here?

Amanda: Mostly brilliant. I had a bit of hassle. I lived on the housing estate, Fairfield, and I used to get hassle there. First of all because I was a southerner. This is going back a few years. And then, of course, I was a lesbian. I used to get called a lezzy and told to fuck off and everything. All kids. But they were never corrected by their parents. I got the police involved. This was before it was a hate crime. Just before. So yeah, I hated living there, but I got this house.

What did I do? I did a bit of volunteering at CAB when I first came up, and then later on at Victim Support. And Janet and I, I don't know if she told you, but tried to start social nights where we'd meet in a pub and put it on the internet, you know, women-only discussions, or group, or just meetups. Before meetups. And they were quite well-attended. But then they'd fizzle out. It used to end up as just me and Janet. So we just started going to the pub together, instead of trying to make it into some community action. Yeah, yeah.

Now, I'm a bit involved in this thing, this Friends of Dorothy project that's going on, but I find that I just don't have much energy at the moment.

Evelyn: So, Friends of Dorothy is-

Amanda: Calderdale Friends of Dorothy.

Evelyn: Calderdale Friends of Dorothy. And that's a project to support older LGBT-

Amanda: Yeah. Yeah. They've got... I mean, it's still, in a sense, being set up, really. But they've got ongoing projects to train trainers. It's a big thing. I could put them in touch with you. I could put you in touch with them, if you like.

Evelyn: So they're aiming to-

Amanda: It's for lesbians over 50.

Evelyn: Aiming to train people to support older LGBT?

Amanda: Yeah, and doing lots of things. They've been to various conferences. I don't know if they went to that one. They're doing lots of stuff, anyway.

Evelyn: So when you were thinking of me coming here to talk to you today, was there anything that you had on your mind that you'd like to say, that we haven't touched on?

Amanda: I mean, I think I said when you came in, I think I've led a brilliant life.

Evelyn: I think so too.

Amanda: I've been involved with the most beautiful women, and lovely women. I'm just so glad. I'm glad of who I am and where I was, and where I am now, and I think in some ways I've been quite lucky to have lived through that time, and been a part of it as well. It makes me feel proud, now. So, yeah.

Evelyn: So you've almost answered my final question, thinking of little Amanda in Essex, what would you say to her?

Amanda: I'd say, "Go for it. You're fine as you are. There's nothing the matter with you. Just go for it and enjoy it."

Evelyn: Absolutely. And you did.

Amanda: I did. Yeah. It wasn't all... Obviously I had a lot of problem with my parents, a lot of problems with my family, a lot of problems in jobs, but I'm a stubborn sod, and I just ploughed my way.

Evelyn: Kept on going.

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: And it's been fantastic to have done what you've done, and to have the legacy of something like the Lesbian Discussion Group-

Amanda: I know, that's incredible, isn't it?

Evelyn: ... after all those-

Amanda: It's extraordinary.

Evelyn: After all those years.

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: So, I think the community owe you a debt of gratitude.

Amanda: Aw, shucks.

Evelyn: So, thanks very much for your time.

Amanda: You're very welcome.

Evelyn: It's been lovely.

#### [Additional questions:](#)

Evelyn: So, I'm speaking to Amanda again, because there was a fantastic piece of our activism and history that we managed to miss out on. That was the wonderful Lesbian Strength marches. So, how did you become involved? What do you remember of them?

Amanda: I'm pretty sure that when I was working at Gay's The Word, there was a resurgence of gay pride. That was before it got very commercialized and it wasn't, you know, it wasn't like a festival. It was a march. It was a march.

Evelyn: It was a political action.

Amanda: It was a political action.

Evelyn: As opposed to a parade?

Amanda: That's right, but obviously it was fun as well. That started to get very big and then very corporate, and got taken over mostly by gay men. As lesbians, I think we're a bit fed up with just tagging along behind either drag queens or leather men, you know, we felt that we needed our own voice really in all that, because we were just getting sidelined again. So a group of us started Lesbian Strength, and the first march, I can't remember where it was from or to. There was a bit of hassle with the S&M dykes who wanted to lead it, but we didn't want that to happen. I think we sorted all that out quite amicably.

Not because I've got anything against S&M dykes, just it was a complete mixture of women, so there was no point in any one particular section leading it or whatever.

We started that because we felt, again, invisible. I think my partner at the time did the logo, the first ever logo, which I haven't got anymore. Used to have it on a t-shirt, which dropped to pieces. I don't think it went on for a long time, those initial marches, but yes, it was really important, and again, a lot of fun.

Evelyn: Did a lot of women join?

Amanda: Eventually. I can't remember, I mean, there'll be people around with better memories than me, will know how many there were and where they went from and everything. I think it went on for a few years and it did get bigger, yes, and then that Lesbian Strength could be put into Pride as well, because there was more galvanization. There was more cohesion then in those sorts of things.

Evelyn: So the Lesbian Strength could march as a part as the Gay Pride?

Amanda: Yeah.

Evelyn: But standing up specifically for women.

Amanda: In a bigger, to have a bigger presence, not just trailing along waving banners.

Evelyn: What was the mood of those marches? Were they, again, was it a very political march?

Amanda: Yes.

Evelyn: As opposed to a parade?

Amanda: Yes. It was just good, just a lot of dykes walking down the road shouting.

Evelyn: Do you remember any of the chants?

Amanda: Oh, just... No, I can't. No, unfortunately. Yeah.

Evelyn: With your placards.

Amanda: Yes, we did have a lot of placards. I mean, there was a lot of small groups of lesbians as well, which will also go on the Pride march, like Sappho and Ken... No, Kenric won't, no. Yeah, there was Sappho, Lesbian Line would have a banner, a lot of women's small organizations, but that would just be a handful. That would be five at the most women doing that sort of stuff. Whereas if we all came together, we all were on the main march, but also had a march of our own. We looked quite powerful.

Evelyn: Well, you were quite powerful.

Amanda: We were quite powerful, yeah.

Evelyn: What were the issues that you were marching for? Was it really around visibility?

Amanda: Yes, it was, and around equality and being seen, just having that, not just as part of something else, but being seen as women and lesbians who had just as much right to all the equality things that were being talked about at the time.

Evelyn: So really, being in London in the centre of things at that time, for you the most precious thing is about all the lesbian spaces, as in a kind of social activism there and a political activism?

Amanda: Yeah, it was about having a community, and to me, that is incredibly important, having that lesbian community around me, and I've managed to replicate it here as well over the years. That women have got something to identify with and feel a part of, because quite often I think that you do feel marginalized, you do feel on the edge, especially back in the early days where there was nobody to talk to. But I've got a friend who lives in Oxford who's a lesbian. She's out, she's got a nice job, she lived in London, she moved up here, then she went back to Oxford, and it's really hard for her to find a place as a lesbian feminist there, because there's none of that cohesiveness that there is in London, that there is in places like this.

You have to have people around you who get you. I think that's the thing, that just get you. You don't have to go to bed with them or go out for a walk with them or go for dinner with them, it's just having people that get you, that you can relax with. That I think was what all that stuff, looking back, was about. It was trying to build a community that women felt comfortable in, safe in.

Evelyn: And you spent a lifetime doing it.

Amanda: Well, inadvertently it seems I have, yeah. I didn't deliberately go out to do it. I mean, a lot of it was a laugh as well. It's not like I was out there, you know, a lot of it was fun and there were a lot of women involved in it, not just me, and we enjoyed it, you know?

Evelyn: Yeah. I think sometimes people don't remember. They think of the marches and the political activism, and everything seems terribly serious, but of course when women get together-

Amanda: Yeah. No, they weren't at the planning meetings in the pub, and the parties. We had a great time, yeah. Yeah.

Evelyn: Fantastic. Thank you, Amanda.

Amanda: All right.



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